TWO DIFFERENT STYLES IN M. Y. BERDYCZEWSKI'S STORIES

By

YOSEF EWEN

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

IT IS WIDELY HELD that a change occured in Berdyczewski's way of writing at about the beginning of the 20th Century. This change involved a rather sudden shift from what might be called the autobiographical and realistic nature of his early stories (such as "maḥanayim," "Two Camps," 1900; "'urḇa paraḥ," "The Raven Flew," 1900;[1] etc.) to a more legendary and mythical manner of narration.

The difference between these two styles is not absolutely chronologically fixed. During the period between 1900 and 1906, there are both stories which clearly belong to the early period and stories which resemble Berdyczewski's later, more refined achievements.[2]

On the other hand, some scholars still attempt generalizations about the whole body of B's work, and deal with "maḥanayim," "'urḇa paraḥ," and the like by the same method as they do with, e.g., "para

1. In Berdyczewski (1951).

2. The term "early period" does not include those stories which Berdyczewski himself apparently considered premature and therefore did not include in his later editions. Cf. Miron (1973). "maḥanayim" and "'urḇa paraḥ," typical of the early period, were published in 1900. "haššənayim" ("The Two," 1903), "ḥag hammavet" ("The Death Ceremony," 1904), and "qayic vəḥoreḇ" ("Summer and Winter," 1906) are all typical of the later period. The biographically suspect "hazzar" ("The Stranger") appeared in 1908. By the time B wrote the longer stories which he called "short novels," such as "qalonimus vəno'omi" (1912) and "bəseter ra'am" ("In the Shelter of the Storm," 1921) he seems to have renounced completely his early style.

'adumma" ("The Red Cow," 1906) and "bayit tiḇne" ("Thou Shalt Build a House," 1920). Some of these scholars describe certain idiosyncracies and topics which, they claim, appear throughout the writings of B. Others try to generalize about B's philosophy, the traces of which—they claim—are present throughout his work.

As an example, Almagor (1973) identifies certain "archetypal characters and situations" which, he claims, are common to all of B's writing. Almagor does not acknowledge that some of these patterns may be found only in B's earlier "autobiographical" stories, while others may be found only in later stories. Moreover, it is demonstrable that those "characters and situations" which can be verified by external data are realized mainly in the earlier stories, while those involving psychological guesswork are found in the later.

Autobiographical themes involving, e.g.: the "Uprooted" (*talušˇ*); divorce from a beloved wife under the pressure of her orthodox family; and flight and eventual emigration to far away places, recur in "meʿeḇer hannahar" ("On the Other Side of the River," 1900), "maḥanayim," etc. Each of these themes may also be found in any biography of B.

However, the existence of, e.g.: the anti-hero's strong and vital foil, as Eliphelet in "'oyəḇi" ("My Enemy," 1919) or Shelomo the Red in "bəseter raʿam"; the legendary, beautiful virgin-and-mother figure, as in "baʿemeq" ("In the Valley," 1919) and "nidduyah šel meta" ("The Excommunication of a Dead Girl," 1907); or the *femme fatale*, as Shoshana in "bəseter raʿam", are nowhere attested to by external evidence. It may be the case that such characterizations are due to presently unknown biographical facts; but this, also, might never be proven. By the same token, it may be that these characterizations result from B's yearning for mythical experiences which he never actually had.

The same fallacy is committed by the critics who dwell on what they see as the philosophical unity of all of B's writing. These critics ignore the fact that the two periods of B's writing represent two distinct trends in his *Weltanschauung*.

Y. Ellstein, in his interesting article (1973) on B's philosophy as it is manifest in his stories, avoids this fallacy by dealing only with the later, mature, homogeneous stories. Yet there is room to modify Ellstein's very promising concept. As an example, I would maintain that the struggle between Rationalism and Emotionalism, which Ellstein holds is a main topic in B's fiction, is projected in a very different way in each of the two periods.

In the stories of the biographical, more realistic period it seems that the Rational holds mastery over the Emotional, since even when the uprooted man philosophizes on the tension between those two poles, after discovering that life itself is more complex and meaningful than abstract thought, he still proposes his quasi-antirational view in a cognitive way.

In the stories of the later period Emotionalism, embedded in legend, defeats Rationalism represented by the Jewish law, the Halakha. Deep-seated human drives, impulses, and desires, usually fettered by the Shtetl community, emerge and smash whatever obstacles they may encounter on the way to their fulfillment. Though the great and beautiful sinners in B's later work are usually punished by Fate and its human representatives, we feel that the author sympathizes with them and admires their audacity in provoking God and breaking His law to gratify their deeper selves. Though emotion and desire are generally punished by the mystical manipulation of a cruel and no longer pitying God, it seems that the author would never wish that his heroes had not misbehaved.

So it seems to me that a more detailed investigation of those topics with which B deals, and those literary devices he uses which are characteristic of each of the two periods, may illustrate the wide gulf that divides them.

As an example, both the nature and the characterization of B's protagonists undergo a surprising change. B replaced the uprooted youngster, the *talus̆*, who served as the protagonist in some of the early stories (Michael in "maḥanayim"; Elimelech in "'urḇa paraḥ," etc.) with a very different character in the later stories (Reuben and Naphtali in "bayit tiḇne"; Shlomo the Red in "bəseter ra'am," etc.), and B's characterizations changed as well.

While Michael (in "'urḇa paraḥ") *et al.* appear to be rather flexible characters who capture our attention via a detailed description of their fluctuating minds, we see in the later stories a kind of fixed, anti-realistic character portrayal. In his early stories B emerged as an enthusiastic psychologist, who profoundly influenced a younger generation of prose writers, including Brenner and Gnessin. In his later stories he neglected this more realistic approach in favor of the practice of his own remark that literature begins where knowledge (psychology) comes to an end.[3]

In the later stories B is no longer concerned with a meticulous and, at times, tedious description of the human mind. Rather, he is concerned

3. Cf. Berdyczewski (1952) p. 173.

with the shaping of a rather mythical, even archetypal, superman, whose profile is purposefully blurred. We may guess what the characteristics of such a superman are, or how he fits into his environment, but usually very little is said about what he actually thinks, feels, or "says to himself."

Moreover, in these later stories, B does not detail the motivation of behavior and actions, but exposes his heroes in concise character sketches (usually near the beginning of the stories) which seem to have taken their typical structure from the "Character" conventions of, e.g., Theophrastus and La Bruyère.[4]

Whereas plot and action played only a minor role in the early biographical stories, in the later stories these components became very important. It is virtually impossible to retell the plots of, e.g., "maḥanayim" or "'urḇa paraḥ" without affecting their overall impacts, but a faithful paraphrase of, e.g., "bayit tiḇne" or "qalonimus vəno'omi" is still meaningful and may convey much of the peculiar quality typical of the later stories. Reuben's theft of the money he needed for the beautiful house he was to build but never possess (in "bayit tiḇne"); the desperate, suicidal death of Shoshana (in "ba'emeq"); and the even more cruel death of Ḥulda (in "nidduyah šel meta") will be remembered by many readers. But we may not be able to recall the not-so-dramatic endings of most of the early stories.

Surprisingly enough, some of the early stories begin by jumping almost *in medias res*. As examples: After some very general remarks to the reader about the prevailing climatic conditions, "maḥanayim" is opened with a rather scenic description of an as yet unknown pretty girl ice-skating somewhere in a German city. Only after several passages are we given a detailed exposition of "the life and opinions" of the young man who is enchanted throughout the story by that feminine skating character.

"ləḇadad" ("Lonely," 1900) begins with a scene in which the narrator-protagonist leaves a university study hall in the afternoon to meet "her," the girl with whom he is enamored. (This unhappy love is the

4. I do not mean to suggest that B was necessarily directly influenced by these men; but it would seem that, at least in some oblique way, he became acquainted with the genre and adapted it to suit his purpose. This adaptation is most pronounced in many of B's less important short stories (cf. "tuḇya," 1900; "natan ben natan," 1900; "hallitay," "The Lithuanian," 1913; and "hamməḇohal," "The Bewildered," 1913). It is interesting to note that B usually added an abrupt, dramatic ending.

main subject of the story.) Likewise "bil'adeyha" ("Without Her," 1900) begins with a picture of the lonely and erratic wanderings of a similar I-narrator who is the subject of his own introspective meditation.

In the later stories, however, there is a different type of opening, which seems to recall the conventions of a more conservative age. The narrator, whether authorial ("omniscient") or I-witness, usually explains (sometimes mockingly, sometimes deadly seriously) the circumstances which motivated him to write his story. He enumerates the obstacles which prevented him from completing his work more speedily, and the scruples he had to overcome to tell so "dreadful" a tale as that which covers the pages of his book.

At times B begins a later story with a very classical exposition describing the sociological or geographical setting of his plot, and at times he includes a concise biography, or even genealogy, of his heroes, who seem to have inherited the burden of good or bad luck of their ancestors. Usually only later in the story does the narrator utilize the kind of character sketch described above. On the whole, none of the later stories begins with a scenic description in which an as yet unknown hero appears to be caught up in circumstances which would serve to introduce delicately the main topic of that story.

We might conclude that a significant "minus-device" of the later stories seems to be B's avoidance of *scenic* descriptions and minimizing of the detailed and realistic dialogue of the kind that is frequent in his early, and especially in his non-Hebrew (i.e., Yiddish and German) stories. A tendency toward a legendary and mythical presentation might account for this minimal use of the *scene* as opposed to the *report*. It is possible that the accretion of details in a short temporal sequence, typical of the scene, causes a sort of narrative slow-down which lost its appeal for the author in the later period.

The very different roles of the narrator in B's fiction may exemplify the divergent tendencies that characterize both of his creative phases.

In the early writing the narrator, whether he functions as the I-narrator of his own story (as in "'urḇa paraḥ") or as an authorial "he," tells his story rather unintrusively. He generally serves as a neutral mediator whose main job is to verbalize a certain amount of plot and character material. When he functions as the more conventional authorial narrator of a story which he admits is fiction to him, he stands very close to the hero and conveys the story virtually from the hero's point of view. We suspect that the narrator is no longer a stranger to his

protagonist, and that he openly sympathizes with him. In fact, at times the narrator seems to identify himself with the hero, whose biography and inward life conspicuously resemble those of the author. Even minor characters are seen through the eyes of the protagonist, and usually attain their meaning by virtue of his being and his relation to them.

Such is not the case in B's later creations. In the later stories, there emerges a more refined, and even sophisticated, narrator who becomes a kind of character in his own right. This narrator not only tells the story of this or that man or woman he happened to encounter in a quasi-reality; he also refers to his own life and biography, frequently in the opening passage of the story (as in "bəseter ra'am" and "para 'adumma").

This narrator is usually a middle-aged man who has accumulated wisdom and experience since the time of the story he tells. He no longer is as naive as he once was, and so he takes an ambivalent view of the world. (This accounts for the many authorial intrusions into the later stories, which recall the styles of, e.g., Fielding and Thackeray.) But often his moralizing generalizations about the conditions of the lives and outlooks of his heroes are wholly misleading, and their irony is obvious.

At times this narrator himself seems to have become the victim of an irony superimposed by an "implied" but hidden author; and at times he plays a sort of "hide-and-seek" with his "Dear reader," in which he pretends to identify himself with the trivial and petty standards of his Jewish community (a community unable to understand the actual issue acted out in front of it). In any case, the point of view of the later stories seems to be very different from what the author has openly said.

The later narrator, then, often plays a double role, introducing himself as an I-witness who encountered some of the characters and collected the sources of his "testimony," and then functioning authorially, permitting himself to know and relate such things as the private thoughts and feelings of others, which are normally hidden from human beings. As an example, the narrator of "bayit tiḇne" pretends that he once visited the home of the beautiful Sara, and even enjoyed in her very existence a kind of poetic inspiration. At the same time, though, he allows himself to know the most hidden dreams of that lady, dreams that deal in a surprisingly Freudian way with death and sex. And he is also "present" when Reuben dramatizes the spurious loss of the purse to keep the money.

This narrator is only found in the later phase of B's creative development, and may be the final product of a literary process that affected

many aspects of B's work. In the later period there are differences of topic and style that cannot be explained away by mere psychological guesswork; nor do they seem to be the result of events in the writer's personal life. Therefore they cannot be the objects of simple generalizations about B's total creative activity, and no single statement is capable of resolving the differences between the two distinct phases of B's creative life.

This may seem bewildering to those among us whose minds are accustomed to reconciling opposing elements, but we must accept it as a literary fact, whether we like it or not.

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